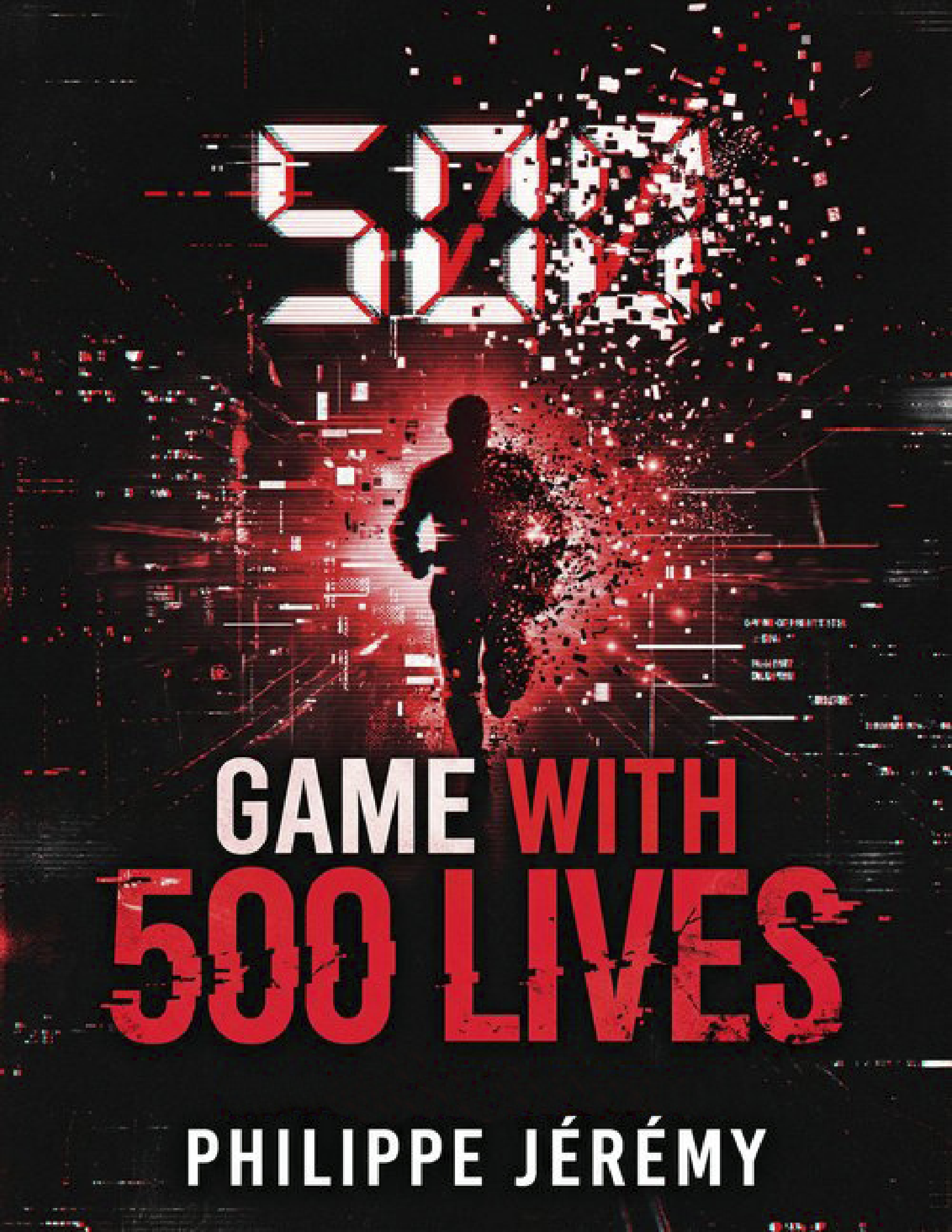
GAME WITH
500 LIVES
PHILIPPE JÉRÉMY

Game with 500 lives

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: The Father of Deprogramming and Serial Kidnapper

Chapter 2: The Anti-Cult Mafia in Suits

Chapter 3: De-programming 2.0. Steven Hassan

Chapter 4: Media manipulation and Russian anti-cultists

Chapter 5: Institutional criticism Sources

The cold air in Bellevue, Washington, that night smelled of dampness and an impending thunderstorm. For eighteen-year-old Jason Scott, an ordinary student and faithful parishioner of the United Pentecostal Church, the world had shrunk to the size of the doorway of his mother's house. He didn't expect trouble—after all, home had always been his fortress, a place where prayer and comfort coexisted in a familiar rhythm. But when a massive figure blocked the light of the streetlamp, Jason realized that the fortress had fallen and that the quiet of the suburbs created only an illusion of security.

The attack was swift and professional. Three men emerged from the shadows with the grace of vultures who knew the guy by sight. Before Jason could shout his mother's name, he was knocked to the ground with a powerful shove. His face was pressed into the rough pile of the carpet, and the smell of sweat and cheap nylon hit his nostrils. Someone's heavy knees dug into his shoulder blades, knocking the wind out of him. While one of the attackers tightened the steel rings of the handcuffs on the guy's wrists, the other methodically wrapped his ankles with thick rope. The hulk leaned on

him with all his weight, turning the student's rib cage into a crunchy frame. The last thing Jason felt before the world plunged into sticky darkness was the coldness of reinforced duct tape. They wrapped it around his head, from ear to ear, sealing his mouth, depriving him of the right to scream, to breathe, to protest. The guy was dragged down the porch steps to a van parked in the shade. Behind the wheel, watching the process in the rearview mirror with an aura of absolute, almost religious righteousness, sat a man with a piercing gaze. His name was Rick Alan Ross. And for him, it wasn't a crime.

A cottage on the Washington coast became the setting for a five-day descent into personal hell, where the line between salvation and violence was blurred by methodical madness. Jason was thrown onto a bed in an isolated room where the windows were boarded up with plywood and the doors were locked with bolts, the sound of which echoed in his temples like funeral bells. Here, time ceased to exist, turning into a cyclical nightmare of pain, thirst, and total humiliation. The handcuffs were not removed for hours. The first day passed in silence, broken only by short, curt commands.

Rick Ross wasted no time—he began a methodical attack on Scott's personality, using what the court transcripts would later call "a continuous barrage of verbal abuse." Ross paced the room like a caged predator, weighing each word, accusing Jason of losing his humanity and claiming that he had become merely a passive vessel for the destructive ideas of others, which he intended to eradicate. The psychological pressure was quickly compounded by physical terror. Every time the young man tried to turn away, close his eyes, or simply withdraw into himself, Ross would slap him sharply on the forehead or poke him in the temples with his fingers, demanding that he "focus."

These were not random blows—it was rhythmic torture designed to deny the brain a moment's rest, depriving it of sleep and the ability to think critically. By the third day of deprogramming, which is what was happening, it had descended into total degradation of human dignity. Ross and his assistants did not simply

ridicule Jason's beliefs — they destroyed his right to personal space. The young man was accompanied to the toilet by two guards, who did not allow him to close the door, watched his every move, and recorded the slightest tremor of his pupils. He was shown videos in which leaders of various religious movements were portrayed as monsters, and Ross persistently and cruelly drew parallels with his church.

Resistance melted away under the weight of exhaustion and fear. At some point, the eighteen-year-old boy, who just a week ago had been dreaming of the future, felt something inside him break. But it wasn't a rejection of God. It was the awakening of an ancient, animalistic survival instinct. Jason realized that in order to survive among these "civilized" barbarians, he had to become a better actor than they were directors. On the fifth day, he feigned a breakdown. He began to sob, shouting words of repentance with a degree of anguish that would have convinced even Stanislavsky himself. He cursed his pastors and thanked his captors for his "freedom," while cold hatred grew inside him. The ploy worked. The vigilance of the guards, intoxicated by their own power, dulled. Taking advantage of the moment when Ross and his team relaxed, celebrating another "victory over the cult," Jason rushed out the door and ran — barefoot on the sharp coastal rocks, feeling no pain — until he stumbled upon a pay phone. His call to the police marked the beginning of the end for the version of the deprogramming industry that Rick Ross represented.

The 1995 trial of Jason Scott v. Rick Alan Ross went down in American legal history as the final exposure of the methods used by "bounty hunters." For several weeks, nine jurors listened to testimony about what happened in that cottage on the coast. And the more details emerged — about handcuffs, duct tape, a 300-pound man sitting on a teenager's back — the paler the faces in the courtroom became. The verdict was unanimous and damning. The official decision included wording that would forever tarnish the reputation of any professional.

It stated that "the defendants acted deliberately or recklessly, committing acts so outrageous in nature and so extreme in degree that they go beyond all possible bounds of decency and must be considered brutal and utterly intolerable in a civilized society. The giant mechanism crumbled to dust when confronted with the reality of civil rights. It would seem that this should have been the end of the story. In any logical reality, a person whose behavior was recognized by the supreme authority as "brutal" would become an outcast, whose name would only be mentioned in criminology textbooks. But our reality turned out to be much more ironic and cynical.

Two decades have passed. The world has changed, becoming digital, fragmented, and hungry for content. Violence has migrated from the shores of Washington to computer screens, turning into a high-tech product for mass consumption. And this is where the most acute, almost painful intellectual paradox arises.

In 2017, the gaming industry froze in anticipation of Ubisoft's new blockbuster, Far Cry 5. The game's plot revolved around a fictional apocalyptic cult called "The Gates of Eden" that had taken over Hope County, Montana. Gamers had to battle the charismatic leader Joseph Seed and his
"family," who used torture, drugs, and extreme psychological pressure to recruit followers.

It was necessary to make the cult as realistic as possible so that the player could feel the threat firsthand. Ubisoft Montreal needed a consultant. But not a theoretical academic, but a practitioner. Someone who knew everything about cults. Someone who understands how the human psyche breaks down, how isolation mechanisms work, and how the voice of "absolute truth" sounds in a locked room when the victim's mouth is taped shut. And they hired Rick Alan Ross. A man who in 1991 was himself found guilty of actions "beyond the bounds of decency" became a world-class elite expert invited by a major corporation.

The man who handcuffed a student and beat him on the head, demanding a confession, was now giving interviews to leading gaming publications, discussing the "nature of coercion" and the "psychology of control." His experience — those very 500 "cases" of intervention, many of which involved violent restraint, broken families, and lawsuits — became his main asset, his golden ticket to the world of big game development. The irony of the situation reached its peak: Ross helped developers create a villain who acted exactly like Ross himself did in the nineties.

When you see scenes in Far Cry 5 where anti-cultists forcibly hold people captive and subject them to "purification," you are not seeing the fantasy of screenwriters. You are seeing a reconstruction of the methods of a man who sits in a consultant's chair and receives fees for something that once nearly cost him his freedom. The tragedy of Jason Scott, his screams muffled by duct tape, and his broken psyche were converted into a marketing advantage for the game. Yesterday's "brutal behavior" became today's "expertise." Today, Rick Ross is a thriving brand. He is the founder of the Cult Education Institute, a regular commentator in the media and participant in documentary projects, a man whose services as a court expert are priced at hundreds of dollars an hour. He successfully survived the legal disaster of 1995, turning his scandalous past into an aura of a "dangerous professional" who had seen the abyss from within.

In a world where information is valued above morality, and the authenticity of a product is more important than the ethics of its creation, Ross has become indispensable. Jason Scott's story has become a statistical error in a portfolio consisting of five hundred lives. The most frightening thing about this paradox is not the fact of cooperation with Ubisoft itself. What is frightening is that in the game called "mind control," Ross always comes out on top. He won when he kidnapped the student, and he won again when he was "punished" for it, because it was that punishment that made him the most famous specialist in the world. In the end, for him, it was

always just a game of survival. A game with five hundred lives, where the rules are set by the one who holds the tape and handcuffs — or a contract with the largest video game publisher. We play his games without even suspecting that the scenery of Hope County is built on a foundation of real pain for which no one has ever apologized.

Chapter 1: The Father of Deprogramming and a Serial Kidnapper

In 1930, as the world plunged into the gray shadows of the Great Depression, in Chattanooga, Tennessee, a man was born, who was destined to become "developer" of one of the darkest and most ethically controversial technologies of the twentieth century. Theodore Patrick Jr., or simply Ted, grew up in an era where order and chaos constantly fought for the right to determine human destiny. By 1955, he had moved to San Diego, a city of dazzling sunshine and hidden social divisions, where he quickly established himself as a man of action, endowed with an iron will and a keen sense of justice.

His career developed according to the classic scenario of a successful functionary: he was an effective community manager, defender of the rights of the black population, and a recognized master at putting out social fires. When the sparks of the Watts riots threatened to spread to San Diego in 1965, it was Patrick who organized the "Volunteer Parents" squads, managing to keep young people from destructive chaos and looting. This success did not go unnoticed in the highest echelons of power. Soon, Ted Patrick entered the upper echelons of government, becoming an assistant for public relations in the administration of California Governor Ronald Reagan. He was the embodiment of a systematic man, a respectable civil servant whose job was to strengthen the foundations of society and protect the younger generation within the strict framework of

the law. But behind this impeccable biography, tension was gradually building up, which would soon tear the very fabric of his familiar reality, turning the system player into the most dangerous border violator American jurisprudence has ever known.

The summer of 1971 in Southern California seemed like an endless celebration of freedom, but for Ted Patrick, it was the time of his first encounter with an invisible and ruthless "adversary." On Mission Beach in San Diego, amid the smell of ocean salt and the sound of the surf, his fourteen-year-old son Michael encountered a group of young people. They were members of the Children of God movement. Patrick would later describe what happened next not as a normal religious enthusiasm, but as a full-scale psychological invasion that destroyed human personality.

He saw his son's personality literally dissolve in a matter of hours. For Patrick Sr., his son's sudden change—his rejection of his career, his detachment, and his endless quoting of Scripture—was not a manifestation of youthful exploration, but an act of "mental violence." This was the first story that laid the foundation for the entire industry. For Patrick, a man accustomed to solving any problem through government institutions and legal mechanisms, it was a moment of crushing, paralyzing helplessness.

The police threw up their hands, citing the absence of a crime, and the courts appealed to the First Amendment on freedom of religion. At that moment, a fundamental shift occurred in Ted's mind. He made a choice that he would later justify with the word "salvation": instead of the law, force; instead of procedures, seizure outside the legal framework.

He infiltrated the Children of God commune under a false name, observing from within for months. This moral transition from law-abiding civil servant to radical self- appointed vigilante culminated in the formation of a personal philosophy of force that left no room for compromise or legal sentimentality. Patrick ceased to be an assistant in the governor's administration and became a self-

proclaimed "father of deprogramming." In his eyes, every follower of a religious movement was a blocked computer whose operating system was hopelessly damaged by malicious software. And the only way to save the machine, in his opinion, was a hard, forced reboot.

His new credo sounded like a condemnation of his old life and a direct challenge to the entire legal system of the United States. In numerous interviews and during private meetings with desperate parents, he stated with frightening directness that he "does not ask permission, but takes children by force if necessary; that parents pay him to return their children to a normal life, and he does his job at any cost." These words reflected the meaning of his new life, in which the end always justified the means.

Patrick no longer believed in the possibility of dialogue with those he considered "zombies," he believed only in shock therapy. His logic was simple and cruel: if so-called "cultists" stole a person's mind through deception, psychological isolation, and "love bombing," then he had every moral right to take back that body and mind through abduction, isolation, and crushing pressure. He became a shadow arbiter of fate.

The sequence of his method, later documented in numerous court cases, resembled not medical therapy, but a harsh technology for hacking the human psyche, honed to perfection in conditions of complete secrecy. Each deprogramming process began with a phase that Patrick called "The Snatch" — a sudden, lightning-fast capture. This almost always involved an unmarked white van, a group of strong men, often former military personnel, and the instant disappearance of the subject from a busy street, a university campus, or from under the windows of their parents' home.

The victims were taken to pre-prepared "safe houses" — secret apartments in remote areas or country houses converted into veritable private prisons. In these premises, the windows were boarded up or had no handles, the doors were locked with heavy bolts, and the interior was dimly lit. There began a phase of

exhaustion, a psychological siege that did not stop for a minute, depleting the last resources of the human body.

Deprogramming using Patrick's method lasted for days, turning into an exhausting marathon of endurance. Sleep deprivation for forty-eight or even seventy-two hours was standard protocol. The adept was surrounded around the clock by screaming people who took turns so as not to give the victim a second of peace. They showered the person with curses, ridiculed his beliefs, tore up and burned texts sacred to them right before their eyes. It was a scorched earth tactic: Patrick sought to bring the person to a state of complete emotional collapse, when the critical filter of consciousness shuts down from extreme fatigue and primal terror.

The court records from that time contain chilling evidence revealing the true cost of "liberation." In attempts to break resistance, deprogramming often escalated into outright physical abuse. Patrick's former wards recounted instances of sexual violence, which he cynically justified as necessary

"break down barriers" and "return to reality" erected by the cult. Surveillance was carried out 24 hours a day; victims were not even allowed to use the toilet alone, completely depriving them of their right to personal space.

He created an industry built on violence, where the line between salvation and crime was completely blurred. For Patrick, there were no forbidden methods or ethical boundaries if the ultimate goal was the complete destruction of what he called "programming." Each successful operation fueled his confidence in his own infallibility. The confrontation intensified with each passing month, and soon Patrick's methods began to provoke icy fury from human rights organizations and religious groups themselves. However, Ted seemed to thrive on this hatred. Patrick personally participated in hundreds of operations, often risking his life. He was not afraid of prison, considering it only a temporary obstacle on the way to his goal.

For him, a person under the influence of a religious or spiritual movement did not possess free will by definition, which meant that any actions taken to remove them from that environment were legitimate in the highest sense of the word. By 1973, Ted Patrick's name had become a household name. His influence on American society grew in proportion to the fear he instilled in his ideological "opponents." Even when, years later, the legal system began to tighten the noose around his activities, handing down convictions and imposing huge fines, Patrick did not back down an inch.

While the press and anti-cult organizations created a frightening image of "brainwashing," behind the scenes of moral panic, a tough and extremely profitable economic model was taking shape. Deprogramming quickly transformed from acts of desperate vigilante justice into a professional industry with clear rates, operating costs, and marketing strategies that exploited the most liquid commodity of the time: parental fear.

Publications from that era show that deprogramming was not just
a "rescue mission," but a commercial service with large checks. The central figure in this shadow market was, of course, Theodore Patrick, whose financial success clearly illustrates the profitability of the sector.

Patrick claimed that he had been hired more than 2,000 times, and each deprogramming was accompanied by significant transactions. The average standard fee for a "basic package" of services in the mid-1970s could reach $25,000.
This amount included not only the work of the "master" himself, but also payment for the silence, loyalty, and physical strength of the specialists involved. For an average American middle-class family, this amount was equivalent to the cost of a house or several years of education at an Ivy League university, but the atmosphere of horror created by anti-cult activists forced parents to give up their last savings or take out usurious loans. Elite cases involving the heirs of

large fortunes or the children of influential politicians were valued on a completely different scale. Fees in such cases could reach $50,000 per operation.

The high price was justified by increased risks and the need to ensure absolute confidentiality. These "premium" services often went beyond the scope of a normal ideological dispute. Often, deprogramming was ordered not out of sincere concern for the mental state of a relative, but in order to regain control over family assets and inheritance. If an adult heir decided to donate their property to a new religious movement, the family saw deprogramming as the only tool for legally and financially neutralizing the "apostate."

Declaring a person a victim of "mind control" allowed them to block access to bank accounts and prevent capital from leaking out of family funds through guardianship and compulsory detention mechanisms. Thus, deprogrammers effectively acted as hired financial raiders operating under the guise of psychotherapeutic rhetoric. The operational structure of the business required significant expenses, which were skillfully incorporated into client bills. A significant portion of the fee went toward maintaining the "extraction infrastructure." A typical operation began with the hiring of "muscle" — professional mercenaries whose task was to physically abduct the target. These people received high daily allowances for the risk of criminal prosecution. Next, the estimate included the rental of secret apartments or isolated country houses, so-called "safe zones," where the target was held for several days or weeks. Logistics also included the use of unmarked rental vans, airline tickets for the entire task force, and significant entertainment expenses to establish contacts with the local police, who often turned a blind eye to what was happening in exchange for their share in the form of "donations" or direct payments for non-interference.

The marketing strategy of this business deserves separate analysis. An organization such as the Citizens Freedom Foundation (CFF), which later rebranded itself as the Cult Awareness Network

(CAN), officially positioned itself as a non-profit educational center, but in fact functioned as a sales department for deprogrammers. The company created demand by broadcasting apocalyptic stories about broken families and brainwashed children through the media. When frightened parents turned to these centers for help, they were gently directed to "specialists" such as Ted Patrick or Rick Ross. It was a classic sales funnel: from a free brochure about the dangers of cults to a contract for kidnapping at the cost of a family's annual income.

Fear was not just a side effect of their activities; it was the main source of the deprogramming economy. The more dangerous and "invisible" the enemy seemed, the higher the market price of the "savior." However, the high margins of the business were accompanied by enormous legal risks, which over time became a major expense and led the industry to financial ruin. De-programmers were forced to keep expensive lawyers on staff or on retainer who were able to drag out cases of kidnapping and unlawful deprivation of liberty for years. In the end, it was the economics of litigation that put an end to the golden age of deprogramming.

When civil lawsuits from victims began to run into millions of dollars, insurance companies refused to cover the risks of anti-cult organizations. The bankruptcy of the Cult Awareness Network in 1996 after losing a multimillion-dollar lawsuit was the symbolic end of this business era. It turned out that even the most profitable exploitation of human fear cannot indefinitely cover the costs of direct violations of the law. De-programming left behind a trail of empty bank accounts of deceived parents and multimillion-dollar fortunes earned through professional violence.

The Ted Patrick phenomenon in American legal history represents a profound and depressing paradox, exposing critical vulnerabilities in the institutional system and collective consciousness of the era. A man who openly admitted to kidnapping, using physical violence, and subjecting citizens to days of psychological exhaustion remained virtually immune to the punitive arm of justice for decades. An analysis of his legal history reveals not

just a series of legal accidents, but a systematic and planned legitimization of extrajudicial violence, sanctioned by society's irrational fear of the "unknown."

The history of forced deprogramming in the United States is not just a chronicle of questionable psychological practices, but a veritable chronicle of legalized violence that unfolded in the shadows of the American legal system in the last third of the twentieth century. To fully appreciate the scale of this tragedy, it is necessary to delve into the stories of those who became the first "test subjects" for Ted Patrick's methods, a man whose name inspired terror and whose nickname, "Black Lightning," reflected the speed and ruthlessness of his raids.

The era of hippies, anti-war protests, and the collapse of traditional institutions gave rise to a deep crisis of trust between generations. When thousands of young people from well-to-do middle-class families began leaving universities to join cults that seemed strange at first glance — from Moonies to Hare Krishnas — their parents experienced not just disappointment, but existential horror. It was in this vacuum of misunderstanding that the concept of "brainwashing" emerged, providing a convenient explanation for why "good kids" were choosing a path so radically different from their fathers' ideals.

Patrick's first serious run-ins with the law, particularly the landmark 1973 trial in California in the case of Daniel Wall, set the tone for his entire subsequent career and created a dangerous precedent. The acquittal in this case was based not on denying the facts of violence, but on their moral and legal reinterpretation through the prism of "necessary defense." Patrick's lawyers masterfully exploited a legal loophole, arguing that if a person is in immediate and mortal danger, breaking the law to save them is justified. In the eyes of the jury, the adherent of a new religious movement appeared not as a free citizen, but as a child in a burning building. Patrick, for his part, took on the role of a brave firefighter who had the moral right to break down the door and use force to

prevent the spiritual destruction of the victim. This metaphor became so deeply ingrained in the legal community's consciousness that even documented cases of beatings and sleep deprivation were viewed as unfortunate but unavoidable costs of a "rescue operation" carried out in the name of the greater good.

The case of 19-year-old Catherine Crampton from the Family of Love group demonstrated how confident Patrick felt in the realm of popular culture and the media. Catherine's abduction and part of her "processing" in 1973 were secretly recorded by a CBS television crew with the tacit consent of her parents. Catherine was held for 107 hours, during which Black Lightning methodically destroyed her identity, mocking her new name, her spiritual leader, and her very ability to make her own decisions.

When Katie managed to escape and return to the commune, the US justice system was once again confronted with the doctrine of "extreme necessity." In December 1974, Federal Judge Walter T. McGovern (Seattle) heard a criminal kidnapping case, United States v. Patrick, and acquitted Patrick, accepting the logic of necessity: the judge compared the incident to a pedestrian running out into the street on a red light to save a child from a car, and the prosecution essentially agreed that the parents sincerely believed there was "imminent danger" to their daughter. This legal twist showed how easily the civil rights of an adult begin to give way to "rescue" logic in such cases.

If the judge or jury considered the group to be a "cult," then any member of that group was automatically deemed to be an incapacitated "zombie" to whom constitutional guarantees did not apply. Patrick, as he proudly stated in a CBS television interview, was simply "giving people back their brains," without considering that in the process of this return, a person's psyche could be completely destroyed, turning into ruins. By the mid-1970s, despite a growing number of complaints, the judicial system continued to show remarkable leniency. Despite the obvious illegality of detaining

adults and capable individuals, the court limited itself to a suspended sentence.

Here, the factor of powerful institutional and emotional support in the form of "concerned parents" groups came into play. Organizations such as FREECOG (Free Our Sons and Daughters from the Children of God) created a human shield of witness testimony around the deprogrammer, turning courtrooms into emotional tribunes. Incidentally, FREECOG was founded in the early 1970s by Ted Patrick, together with a group of parents whose children were members of the Children of God movement. Patrick was the initiator, ideologist, and public face of the organization. At each trial, dozens of mothers and fathers, with tears in their eyes, thanked Patrick for "returning" their children, effectively blackmailing the justice system with public morality. For the system, he ceased to be a repeat offender and became an extreme social worker, doing the dirty work of preserving the traditional family that the state itself did not dare to do. The central tool of this long-standing impunity was the pseudoscientific concept of "brainwashing." It was this concept that allowed Patrick and his defense team to legally dehumanize the victims.

The courts accepted this concept without proper psychological examination, effectively legalizing the abduction of people on the basis of their beliefs. In the eyes of the law, Patrick's victim ceased to be a subject of law; she became a "broken mechanism" requiring aggressive repair. This turned court proceedings into acts of anti-cult propaganda, where the perpetrator acted as an expert on mental hygiene and the victim as an insane patient whose complaints of abuse had no legal weight.

However, by the mid-1970s, Patrick's activities had encountered their first serious intellectual opposition in the case of Wendy Helander, a member of the Unification Church. This case exposed a fundamental legal conflict: the right of an adult to freedom of conscience versus
the parents' "right" to forcibly return their child to the family fold.

The Helander family, with Patrick's support, viewed Wendy's mind as territory occupied by the hostile force of Moon. In January 1975, Patrick held the girl for fourteen hours, using the "wedge technique" — bringing the victim to emotional collapse through continuous shouting, insults to her faith, and the demonstration of "compromising" evidence against the group's leader. However, Wendy proved to be stronger than her tormentor had anticipated. As noted by sociologist of religion James Richardson, Helander employed a unique strategy of imitation. She realized that the abuse would not stop until she "saw the light."

The girl began to cry, agree with Patrick's arguments, and skillfully imitate a return to the "normality" that was demanded of her. As soon as her captors' vigilance weakened, Wendy escaped and returned to the community. In subsequent court hearings in Connecticut, her detailed testimony exposed the absurdity of the temporary "guardianship" system, in which courts granted parents permission to effectively carry out extrajudicial punishment of their adult children.

Helander proved that "forced healing" only leads to more complex forms of psychological defense and an even deeper rift between generations. The problem was that the American judicial system at the time was paralyzed by fear of "cults." The deprogrammers' lawyers successfully used the "necessity defense" doctrine. The essence of this doctrine was that committing a crime (abduction) is justified if it prevents a greater evil. In the eyes of many judges, membership in a non-traditional religious group was precisely such "greater evil," comparable to drug addiction or mental illness.

This led to a situation of legal chaos, where laws on freedom of religion and personal inviolability simply ceased to function as soon as the word "cult" appeared in a case. By the early 1980s, deprogramming had finally gone beyond the fight against new religious movements, becoming a tool for suppressing any social or personal difference that did not fit into the conservative framework.

Even when the courts found him guilty of kidnapping and conspiracy, the actual prison terms were short or replaced by fines.

Here showed deep disintegration in the American law enforcement system: law enforcement agencies in different states acted independently, allowing Patrick to maneuver between jurisdictions for years. For example, information about his past actions in California was often ignored in Ohio or Connecticut, and his early releases were made under intense pressure from media campaigns that portrayed him as a victim of "state arbitrariness against the family." The media played a key role in shaping the image of the "Black Lightning" — a lone hero who does what is necessary, regardless of the formalities of the law. Popular talk shows and major newspapers perpetuated the myth of Patrick as the only shield protecting American society from a "psychological epidemic."

By 1983, when he again received only a suspended sentence in Connecticut for grossly violating the civil rights of Richard Cooper, it became clear that American justice had capitulated to the mythology of deprogramming. Punishing Patrick to the full extent of the law would have meant admitting that the state was incapable of protecting the sacred institution of the family from new cultural challenges.

The tragedy of Ted Patrick's case is that his impunity was not the result of his personal superiority or legal genius. It was the collective product of a society that, in a state of moral hysteria, agreed to trade the right to an illusion of security.

Patrick exploited parents' deepest fears, turning them into his allies and a living shield from justice, thereby setting a dangerous precedent where one person's personal beliefs can become grounds for depriving another of their liberty with the full connivance of the law. Ted Patrick was convicted more than once for kidnapping and assault, but instead of serving a long prison sentence, he received suspended sentences and continued his criminal activities. Why? Because society, manipulated by anti-cult propaganda, believed that

the end justified the means. Patrick created an industry. And that industry demanded human suffering.

The 1981 case of Stephanie Ritmiller became the darkest and most shameful page in the history of Patrick and his "school." This time, the target was
The "treatment" was not religion, but sexual orientation. The parents of 20-year-old Stephanie, unable to accept her identity, ordered her kidnapping in order to
"cure" their daughter of her lesbian relationship. Ted Patrick, who was on probation at the time after another court case, supervised the process remotely, sending his most brutal assistants to an isolated cottage in Cedar Bluff, Alabama.

What happened there over the course of seven days can only be described as a series of serious criminal offenses. According to the materials of the high-profile case, Stephanie was handcuffed to a bed and sexually assaulted. James Rowe, one of the deprogrammers hired by Patrick, raped the girl several nights in a row, cynically claiming that it was part of the "therapy" necessary for her to "understand what it's like to be with a real man." The shocking outcome of the trial was Patrick's acquittal in 1982. The court effectively legalized the right to violence within the family if it was aimed at correcting behavior that was not approved by elders or the majority of society.

This decision was the culmination of the dehumanization of the victims: Stephanie Ritmiller ceased to be a person in the eyes of the law and became a broken object that needed to be "repaired" by any means necessary, even the most dirty ones. This case demonstrated that the ideology of deprogramming was closely linked to broader mechanisms of social control. It gave the powerful the right to define the boundaries of normality for the weak.

Sometimes families tried to do this — and sometimes juries were surprisingly tolerant of it. But when society agrees to violence for the sake of "saving" someone's mind, it risks losing its own

conscience and the right to call itself free. Black Lightning faded away, his methods officially condemned by most professional psychological associations. Patrick's legacy reminds us that true freedom is, above all, a person's right to their own mistakes, their own searches, and even their own delusions, as long as they do not violate the rights of others.

Chapter 2: The Anti-Cult Mafia in Suits

The history of the Cult Awareness Network (CAN) is one of the most telling examples of how institutionalized fear can be converted into a sustainable and extremely profitable business model. For outside observers, lawmakers, and the press, the organization spent decades building a facade of a respectable information center driven solely by humanitarian goals.

The network's official mission was to protect human rights, support families, and educate the public about the dangers posed by so-called destructive religious groups. However, behind this polished facade lay a complex, deeply layered structure whose actual operations had little to do with charity, operating according to the laws of the shadow market of force services and psychological manipulation. The key node of this system, its "entry point," was the CAN hotline. From an analytical perspective, this tool cannot be viewed simply as a psychological support service. It was a highly effective mechanism for generating demand.

When concerned relatives called the Cult Awareness Network (CAN) hotline, they often spoke to volunteers and staff whose job was to provide advice and gather information—but in some cases also to refer them to "specialists" in "cult extraction." Instead of providing neutral information about the group, the conversation often revolved around "brainwashing" rhetoric, which could quickly cause callers to panic. Warnings about "personality destruction" and

possible danger were used, which deprived families of their ability to think rationally and made them susceptible to radical decisions.

This artificially inflated crisis deprived families of their ability to think rationally, turning them from people seeking advice into ideal consumers of radical solutions. The hotline functioned as sales funnel, where the end product was not information, but expensive and often illegal interference. The shadow side of this system was based on a network of contacts, which included Ted Patrick, Rick Ross, and Galen Kelly.

In order to protect the parent organization from legal consequences, a "cut-out" system was developed. Officially, CAN claimed not to support violent methods, but in practice, hotline calls were redirected to these specific individuals through a chain of affiliates and regional activists. This scheme allowed the network to maintain its status as a taxable non- profit organization while effectively acting as a dispatch center for semi-legal force operations.

In order to protect the parent organization from legal consequences, a practice of "cut- out" developed around CAN: officially, CAN stated that it did not support violent methods, but in practice, hotline calls often went through a network of regional "contact persons" and volunteers who had already been privately connecting families with specific practitioners. It was this chain of "hotline → volunteer → deprogrammer" that appeared in descriptions of the network's work and in court cases surrounding it.

This structure allowed the organization to publicly maintain distance while retaining its tax-exempt nonprofit status, even when its "field solutions" were on the verge of illegality.

This financial symbiotic relationship between the information center and field agents created a cycle of corruption: the more panic CAN generated through its channels, the more orders deprogrammers received, and the greater the financial flows returning to the organization to support its activities. The legitimacy

of the Cult Awareness Network's activities required not only financial stability, but also deep integration into state and public institutions. To accomplish this task, a complex system of intellectual and legal cover was built. CAN's main partner in this field was the American Family Foundation (AFF), now known as ICSA. If CAN was the "fighting wing" and marketing center of the movement, the AFF served as its academic foundation.

Together, they created the appearance of scientific consensus around the concept "brainwashing" and "undue influence." Through AFF, the organization gained access to large grants for educational programs. These funds, allocated both by private foundations and through quasi-governmental structures, were used to prepare materials that were then introduced into the US legal and educational systems. The culmination of this strategy was a joint report in 1994, which also involved the American Bar Association (ABA), allowing anti-cult narratives to gain the status of expert knowledge by giving the document legal status. The most important tool in CAN's arsenal was a strategy of creating "moral panic," which perfectly resonated with the media's need for sensational content.

The organization masterfully used large-scale tragedies to strengthen its influence. The events in Jonestown in 1978 and the siege of Mount Carmel in Waco (1993) provided the network with an ideal marketing backdrop. Instead of promoting an objective investigation into the causes of these tragedies, CAN spokespersons used them as evidence of the need for preventive violence and strict control. Patricia Ryan, who headed CAN, exploited her personal tragedy—the death of her father, Congressman Leo Ryan, in Jonestown—to promote an aggressive agenda. In the media, any group that did not fit into the traditional framework was immediately labeled a
a "potential Jonestown," which deprived society of the opportunity for calm dialogue and justified any actions taken by deprogrammers in the eyes of the general public.

The symbiosis between CAN and television and the press reached its peak in the 1980s and early 1990s . The organization became effectively exclusive supplier "experts" and "victims" for top-rated shows such as Oprah Winfrey and Phil Donahue. These programs needed dramatic stories, and CAN provided them in unlimited quantities. The television format, which focused on emotions rather than fact-checking, allowed network representatives to broadcast the wildest accusations without the risk of being exposed. The serious press was not far behind: The New York Times and The Washington Post regularly quoted CAN officials as independent experts, thereby institutionalizing their status. This created a mutually reinforcing cycle of authority: the media referred to CAN because it was considered an authoritative organization, and it was considered authoritative because it was referred to by the leading media outlets. To maintain this media homeostasis, CAN did not shy away from outright falsification.

One of the most confusing chapters in the organization's history was its use of "professional victims," the most prominent example of which was Harry Lynn Scarff. For many years, this man recounted his experiences in various cults in chilling detail, including fictional rituals and plans for mass murder. Later, under oath, Skorff claimed that much of his testimony had been tailored to meet expectations—and that CAN and its associates had encouraged such stories for media effect and to maintain public alarm.

Such "planted victims" were necessary to bridge the gap between the reality, where most new religious movements posed no threat, and the worldview that CAN was selling. Ultimately, it was this alliance between the ratings-hungry press, politicians seeking easy answers, and cynical network officials that allowed the deprogramming system to exist for so long, turning a gross violation of civil rights into a socially acceptable practice of "salvation."

When we look closely at the quarter-century span of American history from 1970 to 1996, we see a veritable topography of pain, captured in the dry figures of reports. The statistics of this period

echo with the slam of thousands of van doors, the crash of broken windows, and the muffled cries from boarded-up basements. Behind every number on this list is a living person whose right to privacy was sacrificed on the altar of
"public safety" and parental despair.

It was an era when violence was legitimized through fear, and kidnapping became a lucrative industry operating under the guise of moral righteousness. Officially documented cases — those that reached courtrooms, police reports, or human rights organizations, — make up only the tip of this iceberg . If looking at the structure of this "rescue conveyor belt," the most devastating blow fell on the followers of the Unification Church. More than three hundred young men and women were forcibly removed from their environment, subjected to days of exhaustion and psychological breakdown. For many of them, the "freedom" given to them by the deprogrammers smelled of cramped rooms and fear of their own parents, who had ordered their abduction. No less tragic are the statistics of the Children of God movement, where more than 150 cases of intervention were recorded, often accompanied by physical violence, which was cynically justified by the "particular complexity" of the case.

The deprogramming industry knew no religious boundaries, turning anyone who deviated from the accepted norm into a target. The annals of this period record more than 100 followers of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), whose shaved heads and orange robes became for deprogrammers a red rag, a signal to the beginning "cleansing" operation. About eighty members of The Way International went through the crucible of forced rehabilitation, and the Church of Scientology, despite its powerful legal defense, lost more than fifty of its parishioners as a result of daring raids by "bounty hunters." Add to that list another 320 confirmed cases in smaller, lesser-known groups, and the total number of documented horrors exceeds one thousand people.

A thousand acts of abduction committed in broad daylight, in front of indifferent passers-by or with the silent connivance of the police. However, the true depth of the tragedy is hidden in the gray area of undocumented incidents. According to the most conservative estimates by experts and sociologists of religion, the actual number of victims of forced deprogramming between 1970 and 1996 ranges from two to three thousand people. This huge difference between official data and reality can be explained by the atmosphere of total psychological terror in which the victims found themselves. Most victims preferred to remain silent, and the reasons for this silence were as varied as they were painful.

Fear of the police, who in those years often saw deprogrammers as "allies" in the fight against "cults," paralyzed their will to resist. Many feared that reporting the abduction would only provoke a new wave of violence from family members or lead to forced hospitalization in a psychiatric clinic. The psychological pressure exerted during deprogramming often resulted in the victim falling into a state of deep apathy or "learned helplessness," where the very idea of seeking justice seemed impossible. The consequences for those who went through these ordeals were catastrophic and often irreversible.

We are not just talking about damaged relationships with parents, but about the fundamental destruction of the human psyche. Severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) became a constant companion for thousands of "rescued" individuals. For years, people flinched at the sound of a passing truck, couldn't sleep without the lights on, and suffered from panic attacks in enclosed spaces. Depression, which became chronic, often led to suicide attempts — the last way to regain control over their own lives, which had been so brutally taken away from them.

Social isolation became a life sentence: torn from the community where they felt needed and betrayed by their own families, these people found themselves in a vacuum. The breakdown of family ties was absolute: how could you ever sit down at the same

table again with the person who had paid for your handcuffs and your humiliation? This total loss of trust in those closest to them inevitably grew into an existential distrust of all institutions of society, from the police to medicine. The final figures for this period paint a picture of systemic lawlessness elevated to the rank of a lucrative business. More than a thousand proven kidnappings turned into hundreds of court cases that dragged on for decades, exhausting the victims and enriching the lawyers. But the main driving force behind this mechanism was money.

It was cynical looting on the ruins of family well-being. Parents mortgaged their homes or emptied their retirement accounts, unaware that they were not buying their child's salvation, but their psychological death. The climax of this anti-cult hysteria, fueled by the Cult Awareness Network (CAN) and their leading experts, was the tragedy in Waco in the spring of 1993. Rick Ross's role in the deaths of eighty-six people, including women and children, at the Mount Carmel estate cannot be overstated.

It was he who acted as a shadow advisor to the FBI and ATF, stirring up tensions and convincing law enforcement officials that dialogue with David Koresh was impossible and that the only way forward was to use force. The narratives created by CAN about "crazy cultists" thirsting for death became the spark that ignited the fuse of this catastrophe. Waco became a vivid demonstration of what happens when deprogramming methods — isolation, psychological exhaustion, and demonstrations of force — are transferred to the state level. The deaths of dozens of people became a bloody monument to an era when the "expert opinion" of self-proclaimed cult hunters was valued above human lives and professional psychology.

The collapse of the original Cult Awareness Network became one of the most striking and paradoxical episodes in the history of American jurisprudence and the confrontation between new religious movements and their critics. The story of the downfall of an organization that had served for decades as the main information

and coordination center for families began not with an ideological defeat, but with a specific legal incident that grew into a devastating financial blow. At the center of this process was the case of the aforementioned Jason Scott, whose personal drama became the lever that allowed CAN's opponents to completely dismantle the organization's structure. The young man's interests in court were represented by Kendrick Moxon, a lawyer closely associated with the Church of Scientology, an organization that had been in open conflict with CAN for many years. Scott's defense strategy was to prove not only the guilt of the perpetrators, but also the systemic responsibility of the Cult Awareness Network as an organization that contributed to the crime by providing recommendations and coordinating the actions of deprogrammers. In the civil trial, the jury found the defendants liable for conspiracy to deprive Scott of his civil rights and religious freedoms. The total amount of compensation awarded was $4.875 million: $875,000 in compensatory damages and $1 million in punitive damages against CAN, $2.5 million against Rick Ross, and $250,000 against each of his two assistants. For a non-profit organization whose budget consisted mainly of donations and membership fees, this amount was absolutely unaffordable. Subsequent attempts to appeal the decision were unsuccessful, and in June 1996, CAN was forced to initiate bankruptcy proceedings.

At that point, the second phase of the strategic operation to eliminate the network began. The organization's assets, including its name, logo, telephone numbers, and, most importantly, archives and confidential files, were put up for auction as part of the bankruptcy proceedings. The situation took on the character of a surreal thriller when those whom the organization had fought against began to compete for the right to own the legacy of America's leading anti-cult organization. The climax came in October 1996, when Scientologist attorney Steven Hayes, representing an organization called the Foundation for Religious Freedom (FFRF), purchased the name and assets of CAN for only $20,000.

This acquisition marked the final act of irony: the Cult Awareness Network brand, which for decades had been associated with the fight against Scientology and other groups, suddenly became the property of representatives of those very movements. Control of the telephone line, which thousands of desperate parents had called in search of help, passed to those whom these parents feared.

The new owners kept the well-known acronym but completely changed the content of the organization's activities, turning it into an instrument for defending religious freedom as they understood it. This transfer of ownership was not just a corporate takeover, but also a profound symbolic trauma for the anti-cult movement. Former CAN employees watched as their years of work, contacts, and the very identity of the organization were privatized by their ideological opponents. In the history of the sociology of religion, this case remains a classic example of how the judicial system and bankruptcy mechanisms can be used to neutralize an opponent.

The collapse of the old Cult Awareness Network and the discrediting of forceful deprogramming methods stimulated a qualitative evolution in intervention methods. A fundamental paradigm shift took place: from coercive detention and aggressive destruction of beliefs, specialists moved to ethically calibrated forms of assistance, which received the name exit counseling and strategic intervention. Stephen Hassan became a central figure in this process, whose path largely determined the shape of modern anti-cult activity. Parallel to the development of individual techniques, research became institutionalized.

The International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) played a crucial role in this process, becoming the successor to the analytical traditions purged of the radicalism of earlier years. The ICSA focused on scientific activity, conferences, and the publication of research, bringing together psychologists, sociologists, and lawyers. Unlike the old CAN, the new network of experts relied on academic rigor, which

allowed them to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of society and the state.

Chapter 3: Deprogramming 2.0. Steven Hassan

When, in the mid-1990s, the US judicial system finally began to tighten the noose around traditional deprogramming, recognizing Rick Ross's methods as "brutal and intolerable in a civilized society," the industry urgently needed a new hero. It needed someone who could transform brutal violence into a delicate therapeutic service while retaining its main commodity: control over other people's minds. was the perfect fit for the role of this reformer, becoming the face of "humane" intervention, which, upon closer inspection, turned out to be just a more refined form of the same suppression of the individual. Biography Hassan — this classic narrative about the "former," which became his main marketing asset.

In 1974, as a young and impressionable student, he found himself among the parishioners of Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church. For about two and a half years he was an exemplary "munit," devoting all his energy and time to the movement. However, his departure from the organization in 1976, in his own words, was linked to an event that became a turning point. Everything was decided by chance — a serious car accident. When Hassan found himself in a hospital bed, deprived of his usual circle of friends, his family wasted no time in bringing in old-school deprogrammers. It is important to understand the context: Hassan did not simply "leave" the Church, he went through the very meat grinder that he would later publicly criticize, but it was there that he saw enormous potential for business.

During those same years, he was active in the anti-cult movement, where CAN served as a hub for referrals and directed families to "deprogrammers" and counselors; Hassan also appears

on the lists of specialists associated with CAN. During this period, his activities differed little from the methods of his colleagues. Archival documents and testimonies from that time mention his participation in harsh deprogramming sessions, which involved forced confinement and hours of psychological pressure. However, Hassan possessed something that Ted Patrick, for example, did not have: intellectual flexibility and an understanding that fear of the law would soon make physical chains unprofitable. When CAN collapsed under the weight of multimillion-dollar lawsuits, Hassan was already laying the groundwork for his triumphant solo performance under the banner of Strategic Interaction Approach (SIA) — a model of "strategic interaction" that he describes as non-coercive and focused on communication with the group member.

The essence of SIA was a brilliant psychological repackaging. Hassan understood that if you kidnap someone, you will be sent to prison. But if you convince the family to create conditions in which the person cannot leave, it is called "family counseling." He replaced physical locks on doors with psychological locks in the minds of relatives. SIA is not a rejection of violence, it is a transfer of pressure to the social and emotional plane, where the main resources are close ties, a sense of duty, and fear of losing one's family.

Hassan presented deprogramming not as an attack on the believer, but as
"restoring family ties," where the target of influence is not only the "cult victim" but also their entire social environment, which is turned into a machine for extracting the necessary confessions. The first stage of this "strategic interaction" is the deep processing of the family, which in itself is a masterpiece of manipulative marketing. Hassan does not simply offer help, he sells fear. The cost of consultations at this stage varies from $300 to $500 per hour, and this is only the prelude. During these sessions, Hassan instills in parents the idea that their child is no longer their child, but an empty shell, a "zombie" whose mind has been completely erased by "brainwashing."

This is a critical moment: it robs parents of empathy for their own child, replacing it with clinical interest in a "broken object." The family becomes an instrument of pressure. Hassan teaches them a special language, micromanipulation tactics, and, most frighteningly, the art of total distrust. Parents are prepared for the role of supervisors who must act covertly until the moment for the main blow arrives. The second stage is the actual "intervention" itself, the price of which soars to $10,000–20,000 for a few days of "intensive" treatment. It is a multi-day format with hourly or daily rates and associated expenses.

This is where the "ambush" method comes into play, which Hassan presents as a necessary element of surprise to bypass "cult defenses." The victim is lured under a false pretext, often one that is sacred to anyone: a family dinner in honor of their mother's birthday, their grandfather's sudden illness, or a long-awaited vacation together in a secluded cottage. The person arrives at a place they consider safe, among people they trust, and suddenly finds that the door is locked and Stephen Hassan is sitting in a chair. At that moment, the psychological siege begins. The victim is trapped: on one side is a professional manipulator who knows all their pain points, and on the other
, crying parents who, in unison with the expert, insist that their love requires his immediate "healing."

This is not a dialogue, it is an emotional tribunal. Hassan uses the presence of loved ones as a human shield and, at the same time, as leverage. While old-school deprogrammers would hit the victim in the face, Hassan forces the parents to say the following to their child: "If you do not renounce your faith, you will kill your mother; her heart attack will be on your conscience." This is violence elevated to an absolute, through a tool of manipulation that strikes at the deepest attachments, turning love into an instrument of torture. The person is held not with handcuffs, but with the threat of eternal exile from the family, shame, and the destruction of the lives of those they

love. The third stage — post-intervention and post-support — is designed to consolidate the result and prevent a "relapse."

Hassan calls it rehabilitation, but in reality it is the creation of a monitoring system where every step taken by the former follower is controlled by a family trained by Hassan to notice the slightest signs of "old thinking." The victim can be kept in the "right" state by constantly reminding them how much their rescue cost and how much pain they caused their loved ones. This state of permanent guilt makes any independent spiritual search impossible. Criticism of the SIA method by human rights activists and sociologists of religion often falls flat due to Hassan's media image as a "good doctor."

However, upon deeper analysis, it becomes clear that the Strategic Interaction Approach is simply a replacement of physical chains with psychological blackmail. Notably, this is done by the hands of the closest people, who are held accountable if something goes wrong. Hassan offers a format that is formally positioned as "non-coercive," but in controversial cases leaves a minimum of legally traceable traces — and that is why the line between "help" and interference with freedom of conscience becomes difficult to prove. In this system, a person loses the right to their own worldview under the threat of breaking ties with their closest friends and family. Hassan has "repackaged" violence, making it socially acceptable, but that does not mean it ceases to be violence. In Hassan's world, there is no room for genuine choice.

If you have chosen a path that your parents or a $500-an-hour expert don't like, then you are "programmed." SIA does not free the mind; it simply takes control, replacing the "cult program" with the "Hassan program," where the main criterion for normality is conformity and obedience. Thus, deprogramming under a new brand has become even more dangerous than its predecessor: it has learned to smile, quote psychological reference books, and hide behind family values, while continuing to methodically destroy human freedom at its very core.

This is an intellectual detective story in which the detective and the criminal have merged into one person, and the victim is forced to thank her tormentor for "rescuing" her from a cage, which her simply replaced with more spacious and invisible.

When analyzing SIA, it is impossible to ignore the fact that Hassan has effectively created a franchise for exploiting parental grief. In his hands, psychology has been transformed from a tool of knowledge into a tool for recruiting allies. Every successful "intervention" is not a victory of reason, but a victory of siege tactics over personal sovereignty. The strategic interactive approach is a euphemism for a process in which an individual's personality is sacrificed for the comfort of their social environment.

Hassan understood that in today's world, image is everything. That's why his books are filled with success stories where the "saved" cry on their parents' shoulders. But behind the scenes there remain those whose psyche was completely broken by this. "humane" betrayal by loved ones, those who have permanently lost the ability to trust anyone, and those who chose to feign breakdown in order to simply leave the room where they were being emotionally raped. Stephen Hassan refined Ted Patrick's methods, replacing them with the scent of an expensive office and the soothing voice of a psychotherapist. For a lot of money, one person takes it upon themselves to decide for another what to believe, how to live, and who to be, using the love of loved ones as the most effective poison in human history to destroy free will. Ultimately, SIA is the triumph of marketing over morality.

Hassan's methodology was based on the BITE model, which describes four aspects of mind control: control of behavior, information, thought, and emotion. This analytical framework demystified the concept of "brainwashing" by translating it into specific psychological mechanisms of manipulation. The BITE model became a popular tool in anti- cult circles and in public discussions about authoritarian influence, allowing the degree of pressure within a group to be assessed without theological disputes.

Hassan emphasizes that intervention must be voluntary and systematic, involving family and loved ones, and that the goal of the process is not to impose new beliefs, but to restore a person's true self, which has been suppressed by a cult personality. In the 2010s and 2020s, Freedom of Mind services became the practical "face" of this approach: counseling, family preparation, possible multi-day interventions, and follow-up support— that is, a multi-stage, paid service. Stephen Hassan, being a subtle strategist, realized that parents' fear of losing control over their children is not just a social phenomenon, but an inexhaustible and highly liquid resource.

He shifted the discourse from the criminal to the therapeutic sphere, insisting on non- coercion; critics note that in practice, the line between "help" and pressure can become blurred, especially when the family is involved and emotions run high. The economic side of this business is built with precision, where each stage of interaction with the family is monetized. There is an important psychological mechanism at work here: by paying such a significant amount, relatives become hostages to the process, feeling the need to see it through to the end in order to justify the investment they have already made. A family in a state of shock and panic is rarely inclined to bargain, perceiving these bills as the price for the life and sanity of their loved one.

The fear economy works flawlessly: the higher the price, the more effective the method seems to desperate parents. Even by the most conservative estimates, the total earnings of "deprogramming gurus" exceed six million dollars. Ultimately, we are witnessing a striking metamorphosis: the violation of basic religious freedoms and the human right to self-determination has turned into a profitable and socially acceptable industry. Steven Hassan no longer risks prison time for kidnapping, as his predecessors did, but he continues to do the same thing—destroying family ties and forcibly reformatting personalities.

The only difference is that now this process is wrapped up in glossy packaging of expert opinion and protected by legally flawless

contracts. By monetizing parental fear and calling himself a savior, he has built a business empire on the ruins of other people's spiritual autonomy. This is an economy in which human conviction is a commodity and fear is the main driver of sales, allowing the modern deprogrammer to thrive where his predecessors saw only prison bars. In the late 2010s and early 2020s, we witnessed Hassan's unprecedented rise in the media, when his face became an almost indispensable attribute of the evening broadcasts of the largest television channels. CNN, MSNBC, and other mainstream media giants turned him into a universal oracle capable of explaining any social or political upheaval through the prism of "destructive mind control."

The peak of this legitimization was his appearance on the Dr. Phil show, where he is often presented in announcements and biographical notes as a "leading expert." This phrase became a kind of indulgence, finally cementing his status as a state expert whose opinion does not require verification. Biographical descriptions and press materials list his appearances on CNN, NPR, Good Morning America, The Today Show, Oprah, Dr. Phil, and other platforms. Major publications did indeed refer to him as a commentator (for example, The Washington Post).

However, behind this polished facade of academic wisdom lies the frightening selectivity of the collective memory of media corporations. While Hassan discusses "undue influence" in prime time, what is left out is that in the late 1970s he participated in deprogramming. Media giants demonstrate total amnesia about the fact that Hassan began his career not in university premises, but in "safe houses" where people were held against their will.

This concealment of his biography allows him to act as a "defender of freedom," while his foundation was built on denying that very freedom to those whose beliefs he considered "wrong." His digital influence today extends far beyond television studios. As a guest on Joe Rogan's podcast, Hassan gained access to a multi-million audience of skeptics and intellectuals, and his own YouTube

channel, which has surpassed 40,000 subscribers, functions as a 24/7 hub for broadcasting his ideology. Here, he does more than just inform — he shapes the lens through which his followers begin to view the world.

At the same time, Hassan's literary success became the driving force that turned his theory into apolitical weapon. His fundamental work Combatting Cult Mind Control, which sold in large numbers, has long acquired the status of a "bible" of the anti-cult movement, providing a theoretical basis for public criticism and intervention against non-traditional groups. However, it was the book The Cult of Trump that became his main strategic maneuver, marking the final politicization of anti-cultism. In this work, Hassan committed a dangerous intellectual fraud: he brought the concept of "cult" out of the realm of religious marginalia and into the center of the political mainstream, effectively branding millions of voters as victims of "brainwashing."

This allowed him not only to monetize the political polarization of society, but also to create an ideal market niche where any opposing point of view could be diagnosed as a symptom of "cult thinking" requiring his expert intervention. In this context, Hassan's philosophy appears as "Deprogramming 2.0." Whereas his targets used to be individuals whose bodies needed to be kidnapped for "purification," today he has moved on to programming millions of minds through the instrumentalization of fear. Hassan has created a system in which he himself acts as the sole source of truth, imposing a paranoid picture of the world on his audience. His success lies in the fact that he has made people see "cults" everywhere: in corporate culture, in political parties, in health practices, and even in family relationships.

This is not liberation of the mind, but the creation of a new form of dependence. Hassan exploits the fear of "invisible control," compelling people to voluntarily surrender their will to an "expert" who promises to protect them. The irony is that Stephen Hassan, who has spent his entire life fighting cult leaders, has himself become

a national "guru" whose media empire is built on the very mechanisms of control that he so eloquently denounces. He does not deprogram society — he reprograms it to trust only one person, turning critical thinking into passive adherence to his own narrative.

When the door closes behind the last "expert," when the lights go out in the living room and the cries of hours-long sessions of "strategic interaction" fall silent, silence reigns in the house. But this is not the blessed silence of peace promised by Steven Hassan's advertising brochures. It is the silence of ashes, on which the remains of what was once called a family are burning out. The intervention is declared a "success." Your child sits on the sofa, no longer arguing, no longer quoting Scripture or the words of his teacher. He nods, he agrees, he may even cry on your shoulder, asking for forgiveness. You celebrate your victory. But look into his eyes. Do you see the return of the very person you were looking for? Or is there only cold and paralyzing horror at the very people closest to him, who turned his home into a trap and his love into an instrument of torture?

Ask yourself the question you were so afraid to answer: what really motivated you when you let these people into your home? Was it really concern for your adult son or daughter? Or was it a primal, suffocating fear of losing control? Let's be honest: many parents perceive their children not as separate individuals, but as their investment projects, as an extension of their own "I."

And when this "project" declares its autonomy—even if it's through a strange religion, an incomprehensible lifestyle, or "wrong" values—the parent perceives it as mutiny. You chose violence not because your child got into trouble. You chose violence because you couldn't bear the fact that your child is a different person. A person with the right to make mistakes, the right to their own path, and the right to be incomprehensible to you. You hired deprogrammers to bring you back not your child, but an obedient version of your child. You bought yourself the right to control someone else's life, justifying it as "the greater good." But love that requires handcuffs — whether

steel or psychological — is no longer love. It is dictatorship disguised as guardianship. Isn't that so?

Those whom you refer to as "rescuers" are, in fact, blatant manipulators. Stephen Hassan, Rick Ross, and their numerous followers are psychological abusers. They do not go where there is harmony; they circle like vultures over cracks in human relationships, waiting for the moment when the pain becomes unbearable. Their job is not to heal families, but to widen those cracks into chasms. Why would they want you to reconcile? There is no profit in reconciliation. They need you to be afraid. The goals of anti-cultists are always extremely pragmatic: money, status, power. Every broken child is just another "case" in their portfolio, another step toward television appearances and contracts with gaming giants. They have created an industry where human tragedy is merely raw material. They don't save lives; they collect them like trophies, converting mothers' tears into hard currency.

Fear is the fuel of the anti-cult movement. Notice how their media campaigns work. They don't invite you to understand the nuances of theology or sociology. They scare you. You are bombarded with images of Jonestown, mass suicides, and brainwashing. This is a classic scheme for creating an artificial sense of insecurity. First, they convince you that your child is on the edge of the abyss, and then offer the only
"lifeline" — their services. Your fear is their capital. They sell you your own despair, inflating the price with each new session.

In this coordinate system, a "dangerous cult" is vital to the anti-cultist. If there is no cult, one must be invented or blown up to incredible proportions. Without an "enemy," the expert becomes just another unlicensed charlatan. That's why they will find "signs of mind control" everywhere: from yoga studios to political parties. They want the world to seem like a minefield to you, where only they know the safe path. Stephen Hassan's "strategic interaction" method is the apotheosis of control masquerading as love. But love is the ability to stay close even when you disagree. It is the willingness to

give advice when it is needed and asked for, it is the ability to step aside when a person needs to walk their own path. Love provides support, but not chains. Control breaks the psyche, deprives a person of their right to choose, and turns those closest to them into overseers. Choose a life of love, not a concentration camp built on parental ambitions and someone else's greed.

Chapter 4: Media Manipulation and Russian Anti-Cultists

What began as a local tragedy involving one family, where a father went to war against his son under the guidance of a hired deprogrammer, inevitably escalates to the level of global social engineering. Methods honed on 18-year-old students in boarded-up cottages become the foundation for the technology of creating an "enemy image" on the scale of entire nations. We see how a microscopic rift between generations turns into a tectonic fault line between social groups, countries, and blocs. The technology of dehumanizing dissenters, where a person is first deprived of their right to subjectivity by being called a "zombie" or "adept," and then justifying any violence against them as a "higher good," is the same universal key that opens the door to coups and bloody wars.

If it is acceptable to tape your own child's mouth shut for their "own good," then nothing can prevent an entire society from being labeled "sectarian" in order to justify its eradication. This is a single chain of violence, where the deprogrammer in the van and the manipulator in the television studio or other auditorium work in the same field—the field of controlled chaos and artificial enmity. Anti-cultism is a powerful, ruthless industry of division that thrives only as long as the fire of conflict burns. They vitally need an enemy; hatred is critically important to them. They sell us poison, passing it off as an antidote, and as long as we buy the right to hate those who

are not like us, this industry will expand its domain, turning the planet into one big ash heap of trust.

The publication of Steven Hassan's book The Cult of Trump in 2019 marked a fundamental shift in Western political discourse, legitimizing the use of anti-cult terminology to analyze mass political movements. Hassan extrapolated his years of experience deprogramming followers of religious movements to Donald Trump's electoral base and the MAGA movement. His key thesis is that Trump controls his supporters not through rational political persuasion, but through psychological manipulation techniques characteristic of destructive cults.

The author's BITE model occupies a central place in this analysis. Its application to political leaders allowed Hassan to draw parallels between Trump and figures such as Jim Jones and Moon Sun-myung, arguing that the mechanisms of loyalty formation in both cases are similar in logic. According to Hassan, behavior control in the context of the Trump movement manifests itself through participation in large-scale rallies, which resemble religious revivals in their atmosphere and emotional intensity. These events create an environment in which individual identity dissolves into collective ecstasy, and physical presence and ritualized chanting reinforce group cohesion.

According to Hassan, information control is achieved through the discrediting of traditional media and the creation of a closed information "bubble" where the leader himself is the only source of truth. Hassan emphasizes that the use of the term "fake news" serves as a powerful tool for blocking alternative points of view, which is a classic sign of isolating followers from the outside world. In Hassan's theory, control over thought and emotion is achieved through the use of simplistic slogans, a dichotomous division of the world into "us" and "them," and the constant cultivation of feelings of fear and resentment.

Repeating mantras about "election theft" or the "deep state" is seen by him as a form of hypnotic suggestion that suppresses critical perception of reality. The comparison with Jim Jones is not accidental here: Hassan appeals to the leader's ability to instill a sense of existential threat in his supporters, which makes their loyalty unconditional and, in his interpretation, potentially dangerous for democratic institutions.

Thus, political loyalty is transferred from the realm of civic choice to that of psychological dependence—at least, according to Hassan's perspective. Media dynamics between 2016 and 2020 clearly demonstrate how this concept was picked up by leading liberal media outlets: major publications increasingly used phrases such as "cult of personality" and "cult-like control" in reference to Trump and his movement. The frequency of use of the term "cult" in relation to Trump's supporters in publications such as The Guardian and The Week showed unprecedented growth. Statistics indicate that references to Trump's "cult of personality" in the mainstream press increased by more than 340%, amounting to over 1,500 analytical articles in a single election cycle.

This shows that the anti-cult narrative became a convenient tool for explaining the Trump phenomenon, which did not fit into traditional sociological and political science frameworks. Instead of analyzing the economic or cultural reasons for the candidate's popularity, the media preferred to reduce everything to the defectiveness and narratives of anti-cultists — explaining Trump's political success through the mass "brainwashing" of voters. Such pathologization of politics has far-reaching consequences for public dialogue. The use of terms such as "brainwashing" or "mind control" allows the position of a political opponent to be devalued, shifting the discussion from the rational to the psychiatric plane.

If a voter is recognized as a victim of a destructive cult, their arguments are considered invalid a priori, and their personality is deprived of subjectivity. This creates conditions in which dialogue is replaced by "deprogramming," and political compromise becomes

impossible, since it is impossible to negotiate with a "zombified" subject. As a result, political polarization reaches the level of religious war, where the opponent is perceived not as a competitor with different interests, but as a carrier of a dangerous virus of consciousness.

Behind the use of Hassan's psychological models lies a complex network of international organizations seeking to establish ideological control through psychiatry, which effectively turns anti-cultism into a form of political bullying. Scientific and ethical criticism of the expansion of the concept of "cult" to the sphere of mainstream politics points to serious methodological risks of such an approach. Religious scholars and sociologists emphasize that the term "cult" itself is extremely vague and evaluative. Moreover, the psychologization of politics ignores real social contradictions.

Trump voters often have rational motives for their support, ranging from dissatisfaction with globalization to the defense of traditional values. Declaring these motives to be the result of "brainwashing" is a form of elitist arrogance that only reinforces the alienation of a significant portion of the population. Dehumanizing the electorate through medical metaphors undermines the very foundations of democratic pluralism, which assumes that citizens are capable of making independent and informed decisions, even if those decisions seem wrong to another part of society.

From an ethical standpoint, the activities of experts such as Steven Hassan in the political sphere set a dangerous precedent for violating professional standards, such as the "Goldwater rule," which prohibits psychiatrists from diagnosing public figures without a personal examination. Although Hassan is not formally a psychiatrist, his work is perceived by the public as an expert medical opinion. This creates the illusion of scientific work and reinforces the validity of political sympathies and antipathies. Ultimately, the politicization of anti- cultism not only fails to help us understand the reasons for the success of populist leaders, but also becomes a powerful catalyst for the further disintegration of the social

foundation, turning democratic elections into a battle to determine whose consciousness is "healthy" and whose is "infected."

The risk is that in this struggle, the first victim will be democracy itself, based on the recognition of the equal dignity and rationality of all participants in the political process. The evolution of the media space between 2016 and 2024 shows a clear pattern: the term "cult," previously limited to highly specialized sociological or theological discussions, has finally become a powerful tool for political mobilization and a highly profitable media asset. An analysis of the dynamics of mentions of this topic in the world's leading media reveals a correlation between surges of interest in the "cult threat" and periods of deep political instability. Statistical data show that the curve of media activity peaks during election cycles, when the need to dehumanize political opponents becomes a priority for certain influential groups.

While in the early 2010s anti-cult rhetoric focused on marginal religious groups, since 2016, against the backdrop of tectonic shifts in Western political architecture, entire social movements and their leaders have become the target of demonization. The economic component of this process deserves special attention, as it reveals the mechanisms of converting ideological constructs into real profit. The "anti-cult" market has undergone a qualitative transformation, moving from private family counseling to participation in global entertainment and media projects. A striking example of this symbiosis between the entertainment industry and anti-cult activism was Rick Ross's participation in the development of Ubisoft's Far Cry 5 video game. Ross's involvement as a consultant was not a random gesture.

This collaboration demonstrated that the anti-cult narrative can be successfully gamified and sold to the mass consumer, shaping specific patterns of perception of reality, where any closed or dissenting group is a priori perceived as destructive sect.

At the same time, Steven Hassan enjoyed success in the book market and in the field of political consulting, whose activities clearly illustrate the process of "market expansion." Hassan, relying on his BITE model, made a strategic move by transferring the psychological framework developed for analyzing small religious groups to large-scale political processes.

His book, The Cult of Trump, has become an important tool in the information war. By applying the terminology of "mind control" to millions of voters, Hassan has effectively legitimized the rejection of rational political dialogue in favor of medicalizing and pathologizing the political preferences of opponents. In this paradigm, voters do not simply make a choice, they become "victims of a cult," which justifies the use of "psychological rehabilitation" measures and deprives them of their agency.

This approach proved extremely popular in a highly polarized society, providing the author with a stable income and the status of a key expert in the liberal media segment. Institutional support for anti-cult discourse from giants such as the BBC lends this activity a veneer of academic respectability and objectivity. The participation of experts such as Rachel Stein in high-budget documentary projects by the British corporation creates a large- scale web of fear reproduction. These projects, funded by state or quasi-state sources, perform a function of social engineering, instilling in the public consciousness the idea that "cults" are everywhere.

High-budget BBC investigations often follow a certain pattern, where the personal stories of former group members are used to create emotional pressure, while in-depth systemic analysis is replaced by vivid clichés that are easily replicated on social media. By 2024, the expansion of the anti-cult market had reached its peak, with fundamental institutions of civil society and leaders of opposition movements becoming the targets of attack.

The constant whipping up of hysteria around "political cults" creates fertile ground for acts of violence. The narrative that the

leader of a particular group is a "manipulative guru" with supernatural power over the minds of his followers removes the moral barriers to the physical elimination of such a leader. This was most clearly evident in the interpretation of incidents related to the assassination attempt on Donald Trump.

The media, steeped in a decade of anti-cult propaganda, instantly adapted this incident to fit its narrative, portraying the attackers as "liberators" or victims of a backlash against the "destructive influence of the MAGA cult." Psychological frameworks such as the aforementioned BITE model have been turned into a Procrustean bed by modern ideologues, into which any manifestation of social solidarity not sanctioned by the mainstream is forcibly squeezed. While this tool was used cautiously in 2016, by 2024 it had become a universal label.

The dynamics of media interest show that anti-cultism has become a lucrative industry of control. The spectrum of application of anti-cult technologies has expanded from the fight against "Scientologists" to the fight against entire parties and even countries. This market expansion is driven by the need to maintain demand for the services of "deprogramming experts," whose role now is to label any alternative information flows as "information viruses" or "sectarian propaganda." Looking at the financial reports and grant support of organizations involved in monitoring "cult activity," one can see a steady increase in funding during periods of social crisis. The money is not directed toward objective sociological research, but toward the production of content that increases anxiety and fragmentation in society. In this sense, the statistics on hatred accumulated by media campaigns in recent years are a direct reflection of investments in the economy of fear.

The use of experts such as Steve Hassan or Rick Ross as "voices of reason" on prime-time television only confirms that anti-cult discourse has become an integral part of the global mechanism of public opinion management, where profit is extracted from every new link in the chain of social confrontation. Concluding the analysis

of this period, it should be noted that modern anti-cult rhetoric has gone beyond simply condemning certain practices. It has created a global infrastructure where psychology, media, and politics are intertwined into a single knot. This system functions by constantly expanding the definition of "cult," which allows anti-cultists to draw more and more social groups into their sphere of influence.

Whereas "leaving a cult" used to be a personal drama, now "deprogramming" is imposed on society as a whole as a way of returning to "norm," the boundaries of which are defined by the same structures that finance anti-cult campaigns. Such a strategy leads to the erosion of democratic values, as it replaces free competition of ideas with psychological branding and stigmatization, creating long-term risks for the stability of civil peace. Thus, statistics on hatred, expressed in terms of media coverage and the profits of "experts," become the most accurate indicator of the depth of the crisis in modern information society.

A study of the mechanisms of transformation of the anti-cult movement reveals a paradoxical, at first glance, pattern: close coordination between leading Western broadcasting corporations, such as the BBC, and Russian state media structures. This alliance, built on the foundation of a common ideology of combating "destructive cults," finds its institutional expression in the activities of the European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Sects (FECRIS) and its Russian branch, the Russian Association of Centres for the Study of Religions and Sects (RACIRS).

Alexander Dvorkin is the central figure providing the ideological and practical link between Western and Russian anti-cultism. As president of RACIRS and former vice president of FECRIS, Dvorkin has become the conductor of a unified narrative that circulates freely between Moscow, Paris, and London. Coordination through FECRIS ensures a unified information front against religious minorities, allowing repressive measures in one country to be legitimized by references to "expert opinion" or media

investigations in another. In this context, BBC experts serve Russia's RACIRS, creating a closed cycle of self-reinforcing propaganda.

The continuity of methodology is of particular importance in this system. Ian Haworth, founder of the British Cult Information Centre (CIC) and one of the UK representatives in the early stages of FECRIS, laid the foundations for the theory of "psychological violence," which was later adapted by Dvorkin to Russian realities. Haworth and Dvorkin represent two poles of a single axis: while Haworth shaped the demands of the British media, Dvorkin transferred these templates to the post-Soviet space, introducing the term "totalitarian sect." This term, lacking a clear legal or academic definition, became an ideal tool for politicizing the concept of "cult." According to Alexander Dvorkin himself, sects are totalitarian structures that threaten national security, and it was this attitude that formed the basis of media campaigns synchronized on both sides of the border.

The period from 2018 to 2020 saw the most obvious synchronization of actions between BBC Panorama and Russian federal channels. A classic example of such coordination is the case of SPAC Nation (Salvation Proclaimers Anointed Church), a religious organization that was the subject of a large-scale BBC investigation in 2019–2020. The Panorama program used a standard set of dehumanization techniques: accusations of financial exploitation, psychological pressure, and "brainwashing." Almost simultaneously, a series of similar attacks against local non-traditional religious groups was launched in the Russian media space. The coincidence in timing and the use of identical speech patterns indicate the use of common databases and prior coordination of expert groups affiliated with FECRIS. The methodology of these campaigns is based on the concept of "mind control."

Anti-cult experts, including Alexandra Stein, Steven Hassan, and Rachel Bernstein, often frame their main argument as a call to action: "Cults use mind control... intervention is necessary." This phrase serves as a universal justification for violating basic human

rights to freedom of conscience. The use of this pseudoscientific construct allows the media to ignore the subjectivity of believers, presenting them exclusively as "victims" deprived of free will. One of the most aggressive mechanisms of influence used in such synchronization is the "guilt by association" strategy. The essence of the method is in artificially linking the activities of a small religious groups with the most odious crimes or extremist tendencies. BBC Panorama and its Russian counterparts often use editing techniques where footage of peaceful communities worshipping is interspersed with archive footage of mass suicides or terrorist acts. This creates a lasting psychological association in the viewer's mind, turning a religious minority into an existential threat.

Demonization through distorted quotations is the second pillar of propaganda work. By taking phrases out of context from sacred texts or private conversations between community leaders, anti-cult experts use the media under their control to create an image of an "internal enemy." The politicization of the concept of "cult" reaches its peak when religious affiliation begins to be interpreted as a sign of political unreliability. In Russia, this leads to direct legal persecution, while in the West it leads to social isolation and the destruction of reputation. At the same time, both sides actively refer to each other: Russian courts use materials BBC as evidence of the group's "destructiveness" at the international level, while Western anti-cultists cite Dvorkin's "expert opinions" to confirm the "danger" posed by certain associations.

The unified narrative of a "totalitarian sect" serves as a universal key to suppressing dissent. While in Russia this term is used to defend "spiritual sovereignty," in Western discourse it is presented under the guise of protecting human rights from "psychological violence." However, the end result is the same: the marginalization of communities that do not fit into the worldview approved by the state or dominant institutions.

Coordination through FECRIS allows anti-cult activists to circumvent national legislation by creating a transnational system of

pressure. It is important to understand that the "common databases" mentioned in the context of FECRIS cooperation and RACIRS, represent themselves not only lists "undesirable" organizations, but also detailed files on their members, compiled using methods that are far from journalistic ethics. Information leaks to programs such as BBC Panorama often originate from these shadow archives of anti-cultists. Thus, the media become not just transmitters of information, but active participants in the persecution campaign, legitimizing data, obtained by dubious means.

The practice of synchronized attacks shows that the anti-cult movement has learned to skillfully exploit society's fears of the unknown. The use of emotionally charged vocabulary — "zombification," "recruitment," "exploitation" — blocks rational perception of information. When Alexander Dvorkin declares that sects are structures that threaten the state, he appeals to the instinct of self-preservation of the authorities. When BBC Panorama airs a story about "mind control," it appeals to the liberal value of personal freedom. At this point, the interests of authoritarian control and the Western mainstream paradoxically converge, creating fertile ground for unprecedented restrictions on religious freedoms on a global scale.

The strategic implications of such synchronization go far beyond the fate of individual religious groups. A dangerous precedent is being set when an "expert community" with a clearly expressed bias gains a monopoly on determining which beliefs are "correct" and which are "dangerous." The politicization of the term "cult" turns it into a label that can be applied to any association of citizens that shows a high degree of cohesion or independence from state structures. Ultimately, an analysis of the interaction between the BBC and Russian media through the prism of the activities of FECRIS and RACIRS reveals the mechanisms of modern propaganda.

Alexander Dvorkin actively used Stephen Hasson's methodology, primarily the concept of mind control and the BITE

model (behavior, information, thoughts, and emotions). He often refers to Hasson as an authoritative expert in his works, including in his book
"Sectology: Totalitarian Sects," where he draws on Hassen's ideas to analyze destructive cults. Dvorkin has effectively become the main popularizer of Hassen's ideas in Russia: Hassen's book Combatting Cult Mind Control (Russian translation: "Liberation from Psychological Violence" or "Opposing Sects and Mind Control") was published in 2001, and its key points are regularly quoted, adapted, and recommended in materials from the St. Irenaeus of Lyons Center (iriney.ru) and in Dvorkin's lectures and publications.

In the Russian reality shaped by Dvorkin's efforts, these ideas have acquired a statist scale. Here anti-cultism has become part of the national security doctrine. Dvorkin, who for a long time headed the Expert Council under the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation, endowed the term "totalitarian sect" with administrative power. In this coordinate system, the object of protection is not so much the individual as the "spiritual space" of the nation. Sects are seen as an instrument of foreign influence that undermines traditional values and the integrity of the country. Consequently, the methods of struggle are not therapeutic conversations, but court injunctions, the liquidation of organizations, and the inclusion of literature in lists of extremist materials.

In Russia, ideas that have passed through the filter of Dvorkin's "sectology" have already formed the basis for fundamental changes in legislation on freedom of conscience. This example highlights that in today's world, the boundaries between psychology, religion, and politics are becoming increasingly blurred, and theories created to save a single soul can be used to reshape the lives of entire nations. This is not simply an exchange of content, but a deep ideological integration, where common methods of dehumanization and a unified conceptual apparatus serve the goals of global social engineering. Exposing these connections allows us to see behind the scattered media scandals a coherent system of suppression of

freedom of conscience, operating under the guise of protecting society from "totalitarian threats."

Countering this system requires not only legal protection of the rights of believers, but also critical analysis of media narratives that have been instilled in the public consciousness for decades by the anti-cult lobby. To understand the origins of what is now metaphorically called the Dvorkin Army, we must look back to his time in the United States, where his views were shaped by the now defunct Cult Awareness Network. Dworkin, having absorbed the rhetoric of mind control and brainwashing, transferred these concepts to a different field, adapting them to the realities of government and the media. Dworkin's army is not a formalized unit with a clear hierarchy or membership cards. Rather, it is a decentralized ideological network of influence that brings together people who broadcast a specific narrative about totalitarian sects, which serves as a tool for social stigmatization. The main strength of this network lies in its ability to penetrate civil society under the guise of expert knowledge, offering simple answers to complex social questions.

The concept of endgame in the activities of this network is inextricably linked to the phenomenon of the sleeping army. This refers to deeply embedded agents of influence— journalists, academics, mid-level politicians, and public figures who may not show any commitment to anti-cultism in their daily lives. However, in times of social crisis, political instability, or high-profile media events, this sleeper cell is activated. Their role is to instantly broadcast pre-prepared messages aimed at discrediting certain groups of the population.

We see how the same clichés suddenly pop up in the media, how academic circles start producing biased expert opinions, and how politicians initiate restrictive bills. This activation occurs simultaneously, creating the illusion of broad public consensus on the need to fight the internal enemy in the form of sectarians. Predictions of an escalation of such activity paint an alarming picture of the future. If the current

dynamics continue, we risk facing deep legal discrimination, where freedom of conscience will become not a universal right, but a privilege granted by the state for loyalty.

Legal proceedings based on misinformation and pseudoscientific concepts of mind control could become commonplace. This would not only destroy the lives of thousands of people belonging to religious minorities, but also set a precedent whereby any dissenting group could be declared dangerous. Ultimately, this leads to social clashes, increased mutual suspicion in society, and a loss of trust in legal mechanisms for the protection of the individual.

Recent reports by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) have repeatedly drawn attention to the destructive role of anti-cult networks associated with Dworkin. Exposing the psychological manipulation techniques used by anti-cultists themselves is key to preserving genuine freedom of thought. The history of deprogramming — is a history of violence, justified by good intentions, and official recognition of this fact is a necessary step to prevent the repetition of past mistakes.

In an age of information overload, the ability to recognize logical traps and black rhetoric is becoming a survival skill. Anti-cultists skillfully use emotional manipulation, substitution of concepts, and appeals to fear to paralyze the critical thinking of their audience. When the term "cult" appears in the information field, it automatically shuts down rational analysis, triggering an instinctive reaction of rejection. The task of educated citizens is to see these triggers and demand an evidence-based approach instead of evaluative judgments.

Media literacy involves understanding how news is created, who benefits from particular information campaigns, and what psychological mechanisms are involved in the process of creating an image of the enemy. The fight against anti-cultism is not about protecting specific religious groups, but about protecting freedom

itself. Analysis of the activities of such networks shows that they thrive where the rule of law is weak and where fear of the unknown dominates respect for human dignity.

Thus, the response to anti-cultism should be not only legal counteraction, but also intellectual resistance based on the values of pluralism, scientific integrity, and impartiality. The information space requires us to be not just consumers of content, but active analysts capable of deconstructing manipulative narratives as soon as they arise. Every word, every definition thrown into the media environment with the aim of humiliating a group of people on the basis of their beliefs must be rigorously checked for compliance with facts and international human rights standards. Dvorkin's army is only strong as long as its methods remain in the shadows and its rhetoric is perceived as some kind of expert truth.

Exposing these activities, analyzing their manipulative techniques in detail, and demonstrating the consequences of their influence on the legal system is a reliable way to stop the escalation of anti-cultism and protect the foundations of a free society. Not only human rights activists and scholars play an important role in this process, but also every individual who is capable of saying no to aggressive propaganda and maintain clarity of mind in the face of information noise. Consequently, the question of what happens next depends on our willingness to engage in honest dialogue and our ability to defend the right to diversity in a world that anti-cultists are trying to make uniform, predictable, and obedient.

Chapter 5: Institutional Criticism

The second half of the twentieth century in the United States and Western Europe was marked by tectonic shifts in the landscape of spiritual quests, giving rise to a phenomenon that would later be called the "explosion of new religious movements." Against the

backdrop of the decline of traditional institutions and the social upheavals of the Vietnam War era, a multitude of groups emerged offering radically different forms of community and meaning. However, society's response to this diversity was not one of tolerance. On the contrary, the 1970s and 1980s became a time of "great cult panic," when the image of the truth seeker was replaced in the mass consciousness by that of the victim of "brainwashing," and the spiritual leader became a sinister manipulator. It was in this electrified atmosphere that sociologists Anson Shoup and David Bromley entered the academic scene. Their work not only complemented the field of sociology of religion, but also revolutionized it, shifting the focus of research from analyzing the "oddities" of new religions to studying the mechanisms by which society itself constructs the image of the enemy.

In their 1980 work, The New Vigilantes: Deprogrammers, Anti-Cultists, and the New Religions Shoup and Bromley were among the first to systematically describe how the fight against cults itself turns into a kind of cult of violence, where the noble goal of liberation justifies the use of totalitarian methods, which the movement officially opposed. The concept of the "cult of violence" describes the paradoxical situation in which anti-cult activists began to mirror the very traits they attributed to destructive groups: rigorous ideological indoctrination, isolation of adherents from alternative information, psychological pressure, and even physical coercion. Thus, institutions created to protect freedom of conscience and individuality have themselves become a source of serious threats to these freedoms.

In their seminal work Strange Gods: The Great American Cult Scare, published in 1981, Shoup and Bromley attempted to deconstruct a myth that had by then become the foundation of government and public policy. The central object of their criticism was the concept of "brainwashing" — a kind of social alchemy that transformed an individual's voluntary choice into the result of mysterious and irresistible psychological coercion. The authors

convincingly argued that this concept had no scientific basis and served only as a convenient tool for those who did not want to recognize adults' right to choose a path different from that of their parents or the mainstream. In this context, Shoup and Bromley first introduced the concept of "moral panic" into broad scientific circulation in relation to religion, describing a situation in which public anxiety about an imagined threat is artificially inflated to the scale of a national disaster.

Strange Gods pays particular attention to the role of the media in this process. The media acted not simply as broadcasters of news, but as creators of a nightmare, exaggerating the financial power and numbers of new religious movements, creating the illusion of a "cult invasion" threatening the very foundations of Western civilization. Shoup and Bromley described in detail the mechanism of the so-called "atrocity stories" — a specific genre of narrative that became the main weapon of anti-cultists. These stories, often originating from former members of groups who had undergone violent "deprogramming," did not so much describe real facts as serve as a tool for dehumanizing "the other."

Within the framework of this social technology, any negative experience or everyday conflict within the group was elevated to the rank of systemic evil.
"Stories of atrocities" worked as a mirror of public fears: they reflected fears of losing control over children, fear of losing material property, and horror of the irrational. Thus, a symbolic barrier was created, behind which the followers of new movements were stripped of their status as rational beings and turned into zombified puppets, which, in turn, legitimized any form of violence against them in the name of their own "salvation." Developing their ideas, in 1984 Shoup and Bromley published a work “The Anti-Cult Movement in America: A Bibliography and Historical Survey”, which became not just a review, but a deep sociological exploration of the very nature of resistance to new religions. The authors were the first to point out that the anti-cult movement is not a spontaneous reaction by

concerned citizens, but rather a professionalized counter-movement with its own clearly defined self-interests. They showed how private family conflicts caused by children leaving for non-traditional groups were skillfully channeled and transformed into a public issue. In this work, anti-cultism appears as a complex alliance of disappointed parents, secular psychologists seeking new markets for their services, and representatives of traditional faiths who see dangerous competitors in the new movements.

Shoup and Bromley have convincingly demonstrated that rhetoric about protecting human rights and caring for mental health conceals a desire for social control and the restoration of the shaken hegemony of certain institutions of power. According to their analysis, the ideology of anti-cultism functions as a system of labeling people as deviants, allowing any undesirable minority to be marginalized. By the mid-1990s, Shupa and Bromley's research focus had expanded to a global scale, as reflected in their 1994 collection Anti-cult Movements in Cross Cultural Perspective. Here, the authors analyzed the process of "exporting" cult panic beyond the United States. They found that American anti-cult organizations acted like missionaries, imposing their concepts of "mind control" and "destructiveness" in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. The study showed that, despite cultural differences, the mechanisms of fear mongering remain universal.

In each country, anti-cult rhetoric was adapted to local "pain points": in some cases, it appealed to the protection of national identity, in others to the preservation of secular values or traditional family values. Shoup and Bromley found that anti-cultism becomes a convenient screen for suppressing religious diversity in the hands of a state apparatus seeking to unify society. This work demonstrated that persecution and the search for "enemies" to persecute have taken on a bureaucratic and technological character in the modern world, using international networks and expert opinions to justify discrimination.

Summing up the many years of work by these researchers, it is impossible to overestimate their contribution to "revealing the truth" about the nature of social conflicts surrounding faith. Anson Shoup and David Bromley have proven that anti-cultism is not a protective shield that protects society from danger, but a complex mechanism of social control and the realization of the interests of specific influential groups. Their works have become a kind of intellectual antidote to the poison of moral panic, forcing readers and researchers to look beyond what they believe.

"sectarians," but rather why and by what methods they are being destroyed. They showed that behind the facade of the struggle for truth often lies a banal desire for power and fear of uncontrolled individual freedom. In a world where the label
"cult" is still used as a universal label for any dissent, the legacy of Shupe and Bromley remains an important reminder that sociology should serve not as an instrument of control, but as a light that exposes the dark aspects of social engineering and prejudice. Their work teaches us to see in every religious conflict not a battle between light and darkness, but a complex interplay of human interests, fears, and desires for domination, packaged in the guise of concern for the social good.

Academic criticism of the authors has shown that the anti-cult movement created its own "moral career" by establishing a hierarchy of experts whose influence depended on maintaining a high level of anxiety in society. The institutional crisis showed that any organization that sets itself the goal of combating "destructive practices" is at risk of becoming one itself if it goes beyond the legal framework and scientific ethics. Concept
The "cult of violence" became an important warning for future researchers and public figures, pointing out that the line between protecting human rights and violating them in the sphere of religion is extremely thin. Viewing the anti-cult movement as a complex social phenomenon prone to radicalization allowed to develop more balanced approaches to studying new religious movements, in which

the emphasis has shifted from searching for "deviations" to understanding the mechanisms of religious choice in a modern pluralistic society. Institutional criticism has thus not only destroyed old structures of influence, but also laid the foundation for a more responsible dialogue between the state, society, and new religious phenomena, excluding methods of coercion and violence.

The logical continuation of the academic deconstruction of the ideas of Anson Shoup and David Bromley was a qualitative transition from theoretical criticism to practical human rights activism at the international level. While at the end of the twentieth century the discussion was mainly conducted within the framework of the sociology of religion, at the beginning of the twenty-first century it shifted to the protection of fundamental human rights. Human rights platforms such as Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) and the international publication Bitter Winter, which has become a central hub for monitoring religious persecution, played a key role in this process. The activities of these platforms have brought the discussion of the destructive role of anti-cult movements out of narrow academic circles and into the realm of international law, where the methods of anti-cultists have come to be seen not as a "fight for truth" but as a direct threat to freedom of conscience.

Bitter Winter, founded by Italian sociologist Massimo Introvigne, provided the necessary factual basis for exposing the mechanisms of state and public pressure on minorities, setting a precedent for the systematic documentation of violations initiated by anti-cult activists. This institutional shift would have been impossible without the formation of a powerful support network in the form of organizations such as Human Rights Without Frontiers, led by Willy Fautre, and Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience (CAP-LC, or Coordination of Associations and Individuals for Freedom of Conscience). These structures took on the task of deconstructing the anti-cult narrative within major international institutions, including the United Nations and the OSCE. Their expert input allowed the global community to see beyond the rhetoric of

"saving cult victims" to see the mechanisms of institutional violence aimed at marginalizing undesirable social groups.

The work of these organizations within the legal framework has demonstrated that the stigmatization of religious minorities is not an accidental side effect, but rather a deliberate strategy of the anti-cult movement, which seeks a monopoly on the interpretation of spiritual experience. The current stage of this confrontation is covered in detail in the documentary investigation "The IMPACT" (2024), which reveals even deeper and more dangerous mechanisms of influence used by anti-cultists. One of the most disturbing concepts presented in the study is the idea of a "sleeping army," describing a hidden network of agents of influence whose consciousness has been subjected to specific psychological processing. Within this model, anti-cultism appears as a form of information terrorism, where manipulation of mass consciousness and the use of trigger concepts allow for the instant mobilization of public outrage against any target group.

The filmmakers argue convincingly that modern anti-cult methods, based on dehumanization and incitement to hatred, are in fact a form of "new Nazism" masquerading as the protection of public interests, but in reality undermining the foundations of democracy. The exposure of such mechanisms of informational and psychological influence shows that the activities of anti-cult groups have gone far beyond private theological disputes. Today, it is not only a question of protecting the rights of individual minorities, but also of ensuring national security and social stability in the context of global information wars.

The ability of anti-cult structures to infiltrate state institutions and the media space to promote their ideology requires society to develop new defense mechanisms. In this context, critical thinking and media literacy cease to be mere educational skills and become the main shield against manipulation of consciousness. A deep understanding of the technologies of psychological terror and information segregation will enable modern society to preserve civil

peace and prevent religious pluralism from becoming an instrument of political destabilization. Thus, exposing the truth about the hidden methods of anti-cultism is a necessary condition for preserving individual freedom in the digital age, where control over information is becoming equivalent to control over human identity itself.

No matter how profound it may be, theoretical analysis remains merely an intellectual exercise if it is not translated into concrete action. This is not simply a matter of protecting the rights of individual religious groups, but of protecting the fundamental human right to intellectual and spiritual sovereignty. The transition from passive observation to active opposition begins with the realization that each of us is not just a consumer of information, but an active node in a planetary network of meanings. Studying how "moral panics" were created in different eras helps us see in the activities of modern anti-cultists a repetition of old patterns aimed at dehumanizing those who think differently.

History shows that any system based on the search for internal enemies sooner or later begins to devour itself, but the price society pays for this insight is always exorbitantly high. We are on the threshold of a time when information control technologies are becoming increasingly methodical, and the temptation for the state to regulate the spiritual sphere under the pretext of security is greater than ever. If we do not stop the expansion of anti- cultism today, tomorrow it will enter every home. It seeks to create a world in which people are afraid to believe, afraid to unite, and afraid to be different. This is the path to a society of total mediocrity and spiritual desert. If we allow the right to spiritual exploration to be destroyed today, tomorrow we will have no rights at all. For where freedom of conscience ends, the territory of eternal slavery begins, covered up by slogans about the common good.

We have all the necessary tools to change the course of events. We have access to information, we still have the opportunity to be heard, and, most importantly, we have minds capable of distinguishing truth from skillful lies. The choice between silence and

action is a choice between a world ruled by fear and suspicion and a world where diversity is recognized as a source of strength rather than a threat. We cannot change the past, but we are entirely responsible for what our future will be and what lessons we will learn from the mistakes of those who came before us. The time for half-measures and passive waiting is over; the time has come for conscious choices and firm positions. History repeats itself when we forget and simply reject its lessons. Waco was a rehearsal. Far Cry 5 was practice. Whether the next tragedy will happen depends solely on the choice: to remain silent or to act.

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